When the Fairgrounds Became a Community Gathering Place

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For: FairburyNews.net
Date: August 3, 2026

For 150 years, the Fairbury Fair has been one of the most important annual events in the Fairbury community. While the fair is often remembered for its livestock exhibits, horse racing, and entertainment acts, it also served another important purpose. For generations of residents, the fairgrounds became a place where people gathered to see friends, visit neighbors, and reconnect with members of the community they might not have seen for an entire year.

The first Fairbury Fair was held in 1876 during a time when Livingston County was largely rural and agricultural. Most families lived on farms scattered across the countryside, often several miles from the nearest town. Travel was slow and sometimes difficult, especially before the widespread use of automobiles and paved roads.

Because of these conditions, many people did not see their friends and neighbors regularly. Trips to town were often limited to necessary business such as buying supplies, selling farm products, or attending church. Social gatherings were relatively infrequent.

The annual fair provided a rare opportunity for people from across the region to come together in one place. Farmers and their families traveled from miles around to attend the fair. Some arrived by horse-drawn wagon or buggy, while others came to Fairbury by railroad. When the weather was good, thousands of visitors could gather at the fairgrounds during the fair week.

For many people, seeing friends and neighbors was just as important as attending the exhibits or watching the entertainment. It was not unusual for someone walking through the fairgrounds to meet acquaintances they had not seen since the previous year's fair.

Conversations often began with simple greetings as people recognized familiar faces in the crowd. Friends exchanged news about their families, farms, and businesses. Children who had grown older since the previous year proudly greeted neighbors who had watched them grow up.

The fairgrounds themselves were well suited for these social gatherings. Large open areas allowed people to walk freely among the exhibits and attractions. Visitors could stroll through the livestock barns, view agricultural displays, or walk along the paths and talk with friends.

The grandstand area was another important gathering place. Crowds filled the grandstand to watch horse races, entertainment acts, and other events held on the track or in the infield. Before the events began and during breaks between races, people used the opportunity to visit with friends sitting nearby.

Many Fairbury residents can still remember sitting in the grandstand and scanning the crowd to see who else had come to the fair that day. Spotting a familiar face often led to a wave or a quick trip across the seating area to exchange greetings.

This 1938 Fairbury Fair photograph shows how the fairgrounds became a gathering place where friends, neighbors, and families came together to enjoy the day's events.

The fair also served as a meeting place for people who had once lived in the Fairbury area but had moved elsewhere. Some former residents made a point of returning to town during fair week so they could see old friends and relatives. For them, the fair became a kind of annual homecoming.

Local businesses also benefited from the large crowds attending the fair. Visitors often spent time in town before or after going to the fairgrounds. Restaurants, stores, and other businesses welcomed the increased activity that accompanied the fair.

Children and young people especially enjoyed the social opportunities provided by the fair. Many young people attended the fair with friends or family members and spent hours exploring the attractions together. The fair provided a safe and enjoyable place for young people to socialize and meet others from neighboring communities.

Over time, the attractions at the fair changed. Horse racing eventually gave way to automobile racing, carnival rides, and other forms of entertainment. Livestock shows, 4-H exhibits, and agricultural displays continued to be an important part of the fair.

Despite these changes, the social role of the fair has remained largely the same. Even today, many people attend the Fairbury Fair not only for the entertainment but also for the opportunity to visit with friends and neighbors.

For some longtime residents, attending the fair has become a family tradition passed down through several generations. Parents bring their children to the fair just as their own parents once brought them. In this way, the fair continues to connect the past with the present.

Many older residents of the Fairbury area recall that the fair was one of the few times each year when large numbers of people gathered together in one place. Seeing someone at the fair who had not been seen since the previous year was a common experience. In many cases, the greeting might begin with the familiar words, “I haven't seen you since the fair last year.”

These simple encounters helped strengthen the sense of community that has long been an important part of life in Fairbury and the surrounding area.

The Fairbury Fair has always been more than just an agricultural exhibition or an entertainment event. It has also been a place where friendships were renewed, families gathered, and neighbors shared stories about the past year.

For a century and a half, the fairgrounds have served as one of the central meeting places for the Fairbury community. While the attractions and activities may have changed over time, the opportunity to gather with friends and neighbors remains one of the most enduring traditions of the Fairbury Fair.